

## **Rivers of Life**

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The objective of my involvement was to use art-making as a way to express emotions, life trajectories and personal stories by youth who are navigating opportunities and constraints through life in Jordan and Lebanon.

During the “River of Life” exercise, I acted as guidance for the participants to visualise their emotions through art, and support them to use art as an alternative way to communicate something that they cannot always put into words. The tool used is a participatory self-expression through art, it is a sensory-based activity that aims at encouraging the instinctual expression of experiences and emotions.

Workshop participants were asked to draw their personal rivers of life on a large sheet of paper. They were asked to use the course of the river to illustrate key events and experiences in their lives and careers. Bends in the river’s course were used to represent turning points in life, while changes in colour were used to express the feelings that accompanied these changes and transformations. The individual rivers and stories, as well as the ensuing discussions, allowed us, the team, to build a picture of the social, environmental and cultural histories of the communities in which we were interested.

The Rivers of Life allow researchers to learn simultaneously about the experiences of individuals, small groups and their communities through a guided conversation with a carefully selected, representative, group of workshop participants. The exercise revealed and documented, respectively, events that have affected the whole community (e.g. war, economic crisis), events that affected particular sub-groups (e.g Gazans in Jordan), and events that were unique to individual families or households (e.g. a death in the family, domestic abuse).

The method is not purely extractive. It encourages and creates a space for community members to consider and discuss one another’s experiences. The experience of sharing and hearing personal life histories to a group of people who belong to the same community can be eye-opening for the participants. It may be instructive for community-members to realise that their own experiences of an event, such as war, are similar to or different from those of their neighbours and peers. Also, it may be useful for people belonging to more advantaged segments of the community to learn about the less positive experiences of weaker members. Of course, this exposure may be sensitive for all participants, who were made aware that they are not obliged to reveal every secret, and that they should feel free to choose not to do so unless they are confident that it will not undermine their interests.

Fifteen artworks produced by young people in Amman are displayed here, alongside excerpts from their explanations and interpretations of their work.